THE POWER OF A DREAM

June 17, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Romans 5:6-11
Matthew 9:35-10:8

"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without pay, give without pay." -Matthew 10:8 (RSV)

Listen to some random reflections from American young people.

A twenty year-old from Knoxville, Tennessee:

> "I worry when I don't have something to worry about. I create problems for myself. For a few more years, I would like to just not care about anything."

Another twenty year-old from Oregon:

> "When I think of the hand that nature has dealt us, I can't help but see a whole crop of nightmares. It is not necessary to revolt. We're not trying to change things. We're trying to fix things. We are the generation that is going to renovate America. We are going to be its carpenters and janitors."

And from Ann Arbor:

> "Our right to be cynical is very comfortable and very safe. We're not going to invent anything, we're not going to expand horizons, we're just going to fill the existing spaces the 'Baby Boomers' created."

Those vignettes, and many others, were assembled by Time Magazine correspondent, William McWhirter, who has written a fine feature article on the "Twenty-Something Generation," the generation following the much observed, analyzed and celebrated Baby-Boomers. The article will appear in Time in the near future. The author is a member of Fourth Presbyterian Church and a friend, and he occasionally sends me things to read that he thinks I'll be interested in. He has given me permission to use his material - pre-publication. What he had no way of knowing, of course, is that I would read his article during the same week I was thinking about that portion of the Gospel according to Matthew that I just read and also

on a day this church designates as Baccalaureate Sunday... A day to congratulate and wish well to our graduates and to reflect a bit on what it means to be graduating not only from various schools - but into the world of the 1990s. As I began to think about it, I was amazed, again, at the lively dialogue which always occurs between the word of God and the word of the world, between the pages of the Bible and the pages of the newspaper, or in this case, the pages of Time.

For instance, Matthew tells us this about the people around Jesus:

> "He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Time Magazine says, about "Twenty-Somethings":

> "Burned out or bummed out? Is this the sound of (people) with places to go and futures to conquer... It may be the first generation of Americans in memory more interested in treading backwards."

And then, in a particularly thoughtful paragraph about them - "The Twenty-Something Generation," but really about all of us, I thought -

> "They are [we are] a generation that adamantly refuses to think big. They, of course, have their choice of seemingly uncontrollable issues like AIDS or the urban homeless or violent crime, to be overwhelmed by, but mainly they seem less stricken by awe and their own sense of powerlessness than a smug conviction that such activities [designed to address and resolve these overwhelming problems] are mainly pointless. The favorite catchword of the era is "casual" - casual in dress, action, speech, feeling: never let anything show, never let anyone know."

"...harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

The text is pivotal in the story of Jesus. There are several important things going on. He has been teaching and preaching in the village synagogues throughout Galilee. He has been telling people that God's Kingdom is in their midst. He has been reminding them that they are not only Jewish Palestinians, subjects of Rome, they are also citizens of another Kingdom - the one based on justice and peace and compassion. So they live in an environment of hope, because this Kingdom of God keeps showing up in the middle of the Kingdoms of this world, the Kingdoms of Roman Imperial Power and national and local political reality.

It is a message they need to hear. It is good news, truly. For these are people who have plenty of reason to live in resignation, to give up on hope for a better world, a better life. These are people who have seen the awesome military power of Rome make a mockery of their dearest dreams. The have seen and experienced what real power is as the legions marched through their towns and villages. They have watched as their own religious leaders, custodians of the dream, slowly but surely exchanged

hope for expediency, collaborating with Roman officials in order to survive. These are people who have watched their heroic prophetic faith, which proclaimed, sang and danced and rejoiced about the coming day when justice would roll down like waters and righteousness like ever-flowing streams, a day when lion and lamb will lie down together, a blessed day of peace when the fondest dreams of old men and old women would become reality, and the idealism of young men and young women would be celebrated for its bravery and truth; they had seen that faith of their fathers and mothers slowly disintegrate, reduced to six hundred some petty rules governing who can eat what with whom when. These are people who have folded their tents, lowered their expectations, made compromises in order to survive, become realistic about their possibilities, protected themselves and their children from disappointment by not hoping for much more than the status quo... "like sheep without a shepherd," he said... meandering, without destination, purpose, or meaning.

And so when he told them about God's Kingdom, it was a powerful word of hope. Revolutionary... because people who live in hope are not always patient with the status quo. People who take their dreams seriously are inclined to want things to change in the world. They become a nuisance, and then a threat to the status quo. St. Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Nelson Mandela... dreamers of a better day... men of persistent hopes... dangerous men.

That's the first important thing in this pivotal text: the lostness and confusion, the cynicism and hopelessness of Jesus' generation. Time suggests worry about what's going to happen and a degree of cynicism about the future is what it means to be "Twenty Something" in 1990. I am suggesting that there are dimensions of that metaphor which describe all of us, regardless of our age.

You can, as Time suggests, choose the issue to be overwhelmed by. You don't even have to leave this neighborhood. Public education, health care and housing for the poor, homelessness, drugs... not simple matters, but major human problems with history and complexity, getting more serious exponentially. Poor education and poor health care in one generation multiply by quantum leaps... in the next. There is an AIDS epidemic raging out there and an unprecedented wave of urban crime - six murders on one night last week at a time when Congress has again refused to control the ownership of semi-automatic weapons.

On it goes and there is a sense in which the only viable way to cope with these and other overwhelming dilemmas of modern urban life is to forget about them, fold up tents, lower our expectations, retreat, hope for little. The temptation is very simply to insulate yourself, to stop thinking about it, to look the other direction... under the guise of realism... to become fatalistic.

It's a reality for all of us, not just the "Twenty-Somethings."

One component of the uncertainty of the "Twenty Somethings," Time said, is the virtual disappearance of the old dynamic of company loyalty and job security as one of the reasons for contemporary anxiety and uncertainty. "Twenty Somethings" have to develop a new philosophy of

vocation and in the process are delaying making a commitment, getting jobs, and are staying at home in greater numbers than at any time since the depression. "Loyalty, protection and security of a life-time career within a large corporation - is a thing of the past. Today it's a world of entrepreneurial, self-employed job-hoppers. Career is a fast-changing series of lucrative assignments and contracts." That's new. It's new but it's devastating when it happens at the age of forty-five or fifty, at the very time when a person used to be able to assume a degree of success, security and comfort. Part of the new economic and competitive reality is that it is precisely then that many are seen to be liabilities, and find themselves suddenly, unexpectedly out of work, which often means out of security and almost always means out of meaning and purpose. Jeanie Duck, a distinguished management consultant, speaking at the Counseling Center Benefit last week, said that when it happens it is often accompanied by an understandable spiritual crisis of self-worth, self-esteem, self-value.

Maybe it's better not to expect much or hope for much for our city, nation, civilization - or for ourselves personally. Maybe the smartest thing we can do is follow the lead of the "Twenty-Somethings" and adamantly refuse to think big.

Which brings me to the second important thing going on in this pivotal text in Matthew. Having surveyed the residual cynicism, hopelessness and lostness of the people of Galilee, Jesus gathers his closest friends, the twelve who have been traveling with him, listening carefully and watching closely; gathers them and then does something brave and unlikely and maybe naive and foolish: sends them out to do what he's been doing - to change the world - to challenge the hopelessness - to raise sights and expand horizons. Given the grimness of the political and social realities of first century Palestine, a sensible course of action would be to take them on a mountain retreat, to a workshop on spirituality, to learn how to pray and to cope internally with all the pressures of the world, to learn how to construct a personal, private enclave of the soul, a religion which will provide support and enrichment and self-actualization and fulfillment.

Instead, he sends them out into that world with a specific, very ambitious assignment:

"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons."

How's that for thinking big? When we think about personal career paths, we learn to set goals and key objectives. We learn to be modest, realistic, to make objectives always reachable and measurable so that we are not disappointed when we fail to reach them. Don't you imagine that the disciples had a lot of misgivings about so ambitious an adventure? Can you imagine setting out to "heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons"?

One of the tragic dynamics which accompanies lostness, uncertainty and fear is a general demeaning and spurning of idealism. Time concludes that the "Twenty-Somethings" look at the great optimism of the 60s, note how many of the dreams are unfulfilled - and conclude that it's better not to have the dreams. That's not confined to them. That's a description of

our culture, our heart and soul... We didn't establish world peace, eliminate poverty and hunger, or build a racially inclusive society - so, therefore, the dreams themselves must be wrong. Prudent, sensible people will be realistic about humankind's propensity to war, injustice and racial prejudice.

In his book of essays, Harvard Diary, psychiatrist Robert Coles remembers how he and others are often retained by government and also non-profit organizations to analyze the motives of young volunteers who sign-up for the peace corps or who take a year off to work in a ghetto... who seem to think they are actually going to change the world; to observe and analyze them as if idealism is dangerous - maybe even a kind of unreality, a mental illness, an aberration. He writes:

"I appeal for a skepticism that ought to be directed at some of our kind. I shudder as I think of someone like me sitting and watching and questioning a young Dorothy Day or Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr.," [Harvard Diary, "Idealism," p. 107]... and he could have said that about the young Galilean who sent his eager, idealistic young friends out to heal the sick and raise the dead.

So let there be more idealism, not less, idealism grounded not in utopian political ideology, but on spiritual foundations; specifically on the foundation of the Gospel of the one who never compromised with the status quo, who lived and died believing that love and hope are better by far than resignation and despair.

In a time of general resignation and retreat from the enormous and threatening problems of modern urban life, the church of Jesus Christ ought to be the one place where dreams are celebrated, where hope is alive and well, where people talk about healing the sick and raising the dead and cleansing the lepers and casting out all the contemporary equivalents of first-century demons.

Church is the one place where the dream of racial inclusiveness must never die...

-the one place where people are loved and accepted and affirmed in their diversity; racial and economic and sexual...

-the one place whose specific responsibility it is to celebrate peace and justice and idealism and hope. In Eastern Europe, the church, it turns out, is the one institution which remained with its integrity intact... because it was the custodian of the hope. The church has been doing it for 2,000 years...

Part of the reason we are not willing to risk great ventures is the possibility of failure. Neil Simon, in a commencement address warned the seniors at Williams College against "caution and timidity because of an acute fear of failure." Fear of failure, he said - on the basis of his own experience writing plays and then living in terror, anticipating the reviews the next morning - that fear is far worse than failure itself.

It's true, not only for artists, but for all of us. Fear of failure can prevent us from thinking big... about the possibilities of our nation, but also about ourselves: it can prevent us from reaching high professionally and personally... can become the dead weight of boredom in our personal relationships; and it's true spiritually, I believe. It's what prevents us from fully embracing this religion of ours. It's what keeps us from bold prayers and great hopes and high expectations.

What about the reality of failure? What about the inevitable disappointment when your dreams are bold? Hans Kung is often asked, he says, what keeps him going, how he persists in his role as loyal but censured silenced opposition in his own church. Kung, a very distinguished theologian, regularly challenges the hierarchy on questions of clergy celibacy, birth control, abortion. In his book, Why I'm Still a Christian, he writes that it helps to be healthy physically and mentally, have good friends and a good sense of humor and to know, finally, that your hope is based on Jesus, not your own strength, vigor, certainly not on the strength and vigor of church or nation or political ideology, but on Jesus and that Kingdom he promised.

How to keep hope alive in a time of resignation and cynicism? Remember Jesus, he says, who showed how strength and power are expressed in weakness... remember "the power of the Gospel which proves in the long run to be stronger than all human incompetence, fear and insecurity, and more forceful than all our foolishness and cynicism." [p. 82]

Jesus called his disciples to dream boldly, to hope for much, to live as if God's Kingdom was in their midst. That is the bold summons of Christian faith to "Twenty Somethings," to new graduates, new students, to each of us, young, midlife or older - regardless of where we are in our journey.

Hope for much - never be afraid to dream... The promise is not that we will know the answer to every question, the solutions to every problem, the resolution for every political, social, economic dilemma. The promise is not even that the way will be always clear or that we will never fail...

The promise of faith is that there is a strong shepherd to follow, that the journey will be arduous, demanding, challenging, but never boring... The promise is that there is one whose dreams continue to have power to change the world: power - in the process - to save our souls.

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Eternal God, our hope is in you. Sustain us, young and old, as we live in hope. Give us courage to dream dreams, to follow where our Lord leads us, to live in confidence and expectation; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.